Genesis As Allegory

Recognizing the deeper meaning of the text.

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In showing that the Universe had a beginning, science has come closer to the teachings of the Bible than ever before. Nevertheless, there is still a considerable distance between current scientific thought and the details of the biblical account of creation.

According to the latter, the physical world and the many species of living things were created essentially as we know them less than six thousand years ago over a period of seven days. Astronomy, geology, biology, and related sciences indicate that the process was a gradual one that took billions of years.

Earlier geological strata of the earth's surface show the different stages through which the earth passed and approximately how long they lasted, while fossils and remains of extinct species such as dinosaurs show that the different species of living creatures evolved slowly from a common ancestor.

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These conclusions are denied by adherents of a doctrine known as "scientific creationism," who are campaigning to require that any public school which teaches evolution must also teach what they call "creation science" as a scientifically respectable alternative to evolution.

The feverish concern of the "scientific creationists" to protect a literal reading of the story in Genesis 1 reflects a conviction that devotion to the Bible requires one to interpret its words–particularly Genesis–literally and to accept it in its literal sense.

But, as Steven Katz notes..., "In Jewish religious thought Genesis is not regarded as meant for a literal reading, and Jewish tradition has not usually read it so." In fact, as we shall argue below, even the compilers of the Bible do not seem to have been concerned with a literal reading of the text. They were prepared to have at least parts of it read non-literally.

Sensible Interpretation

In the Middle Ages, Saadia Gaon argued that a biblical passage should not be interpreted literally if that made a passage mean something contrary to the senses or reason (or, as we would say, science; *Emunot ve-Deot*, chapter 7). Maimonides applied this principle to theories about creation. He held that if the eternity of the universe (what we would call the Steady State theory) could be proven by logic (science) then the biblical passages speaking about creation at a point in time could and should be interpreted figuratively in a way that is compatible with the eternity of the universe.

It is only because the eternity of the universe has not been proven that he interpreted the verses about creation at a point in time literally (*Guide*, II, 25), but he still insisted that the creation story as a whole was written metaphorically (*Book I*, Introduction).

To Saadia and Maimonides, belief in the truth of the Bible does not require a denial of science ("reason," "logic") when the two seem to conflict. These philosophers imply that questions of science should be left to scientists and scientific method. In fact, Maimonides quotes a passage in the Talmud in which Jewish scholars abandoned an astronomical theory of their own in favor of a theory of gentile scholars (Pesahim 94b).

Maimonides approved of their action, saying that "speculative matters everyone treats according to the results of his own study, and everyone accepts that which appears to him established by proof" (*Guide*, II, 8). To him, clearly, Science is a matter of speculation and is not the field in which the Bible seeks to be decisive.

Delving More Deeply

In more recent times Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook held that scientific ideas which seem to conflict with the Torah need not necessarily be opposed, but can serve as stimuli to delve more deeply into the Torah and discover more profound meaning in it.

The approach of these thinkers is one that Fritz Rothschild has described as a guiding principle of Jewish biblical exegesis:

"The view that the Bible contains God's message to man has led to ever new interpretations, since it constantly forced believing readers of the Bible to reconcile the words of the sacred text with whatever they held to be true on the basis of their own experience, the canons of logic, contemporary science, and their moral insights.... The traditionalist will always feel called upon to interpret the text so that it reflects not ancient error but the highest standards of trustworthy knowledge and insight of his own time." (Rothschild, "Truth and Metaphor in the Bible")

This approach urges us to probe more deeply into the biblical accounts of creation and to search for the intention of the Bible's compilers in presenting these accounts. By compilers I mean those who gathered all the sources and books together and produced the Bible in the form in which it was canonized in classical Judaism. In critical terms these are the redactors of the Bible; in Franz Rosenzweig's terms, *rabboteinu* (our rabbis).

Conflicting Accounts of Creation

Whatever the intention of the individual accounts of creation may have been, it is clear from the Bible as a whole that its compilers were not overly concerned with the details of the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis. They incorporated several accounts of creation in the Bible even though no two accounts agree in detail with Genesis 1 or with each other. Genesis 1 describes the creation of the world in six days. The second account of creation is the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2).

Several other accounts are found in poetic form in Psalms, Proverbs, and Job. Genesis 1 says that man was the last living creature created; Genesis 2 says that he was the first. Genesis 1 speaks of the prehistoric waters in purely naturalistic terms and says that God merely commanded them to gather in a single spot so that dry land could appear.

But in poetic passages the ancient waters are personified as rebellious sea monsters which threatened to swamp the dry land, until God subdued them and created the seashore as a boundary which they were prohibited from crossing.

The most notable difference between Genesis and all the other accounts is that none of the others mentions the idea that the world was created in six days. This idea–which is the centerpiece of the whole creationist movement–was apparently not considered important enough in the Bible to be repeated in other accounts of creation.

The fact that so many differing accounts were all accepted in the Bible shows that its compilers were not concerned about these details. They undoubtedly assumed that the differences could be reconciled, but they left this task to the ingenuity of exegetes. This virtually assured that different reconciliations would be proposed and some of the passages would have to be interpreted non-literally.

What the Bible as a whole insists on is not these details, but only what the stories have in common. In other words, these stories are regarded as poetic statements of certain basic truths, not as literally scientific accounts of how the universe developed.

The Divine Plan

What matters in Judaism are the concepts shared by all these stories: that the world was created by God, that He planned it carefully and designed it to be hospitable to man. These are the very conclusions to which astronomy now points. The other details of the biblical accounts should not be taken literally, but metaphorically or poetically.

To give just one example: the six days of creation culminating in the Sabbath on the seventh day symbolize how God guided the development of the world stage by stage according to a well-thought-out plan. The process is described as taking place over a period of seven days because seven was regarded in the ancient world as the number of perfection and seven days were regarded as the ideal length of a process. The unit of "seven days" is more a statement about the perfection of the process than a chronological statistic.

Thus a literal reading of the Bible, on which "creation science" implicitly insists, misses the point of the Bible itself, which seems uninterested in literal interpretation. Like poetry and certain kinds of prose, which sometimes speak in metaphors and symbols, the Bible as a whole does not intend these stories to be taken literally.

Literalism is not only misleading but is also a disservice to the cause of the Bible itself. It forces the Bible to compete as science, and in such a competition it cannot win. In a scientific age such as ours the Bible will never be accepted as science by educated people.

What is more, attempting to secure acceptance for it as science is hardly worthwhile, for this would divert attention away from the Bible's religious message to details which from a religious point of view are trivial.

The religious message is precisely the realm in which science cannot compete, and those devoted to the cause of the Bible would do far better service to their cause by stressing its unique religious message. To the religious person it makes little difference whether the world was created in six days or several billion years.

What counts is the deeper message of the biblical account of creation: The world was made by a wise Creator who seeks man's welfare, who created the world carefully with man's benefit in mind, who created man with Godlike qualities and commanded him to administer the world wisely.

Though we observe the Sabbath every seven days, it is this deeper message which we celebrate each week. The current views of modern science deepen our understanding of this message and renew our confidence in it.

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